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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at trends toward more inclusive education for students with disabilities in Sweden in the context of budgetary cut-backs in school resources. It reports on a project that investigated processes of defining target populations for special education in Swedish schools. Special educators (N=27), classroom teachers (N=35) and principals (N=18) were interviewed about how the concept of special education was defined in terms of practice and asked to describe special education activities in their schools. The study also analyzed data from a longitudinal database that included 5,000 pupils born in 1977 and 10,000 pupils born in 1982. Among findings were: (1) classroom teachers and special educators recognized that special education lightens the work load of teachers in regular classes by offering more or less permanent solutions to the problem of difficult students; (2) among individual child characteristics, socio-emotional disorders were the most common reason for referral to special education; (3) most special education takes place outside the regular classrooms in part-time settings; and (4) more than half of interviewees reported that Individualized Education Plans were never used. Results suggest that definitions of target groups for special needs education vary greatly among schools. (Contains 25 references.) (DB)

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WHO NEEDS SPECIAL EDUCATION?

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INTRODUCTION

The field of special education is marked by complexity, confusion concerning terms and concepts and disagreements about its disciplinary habitat. In a recent article Skidmore claims that "the [theoretical] framework would ... be directed towards an understanding of special needs as a relational concept, rather than a reified category; a concept which denotes the construction of a specific set of relationships between pupil's learning (or failure to learn) and the system of schooling" (Skidmore, 1996).
Hegarty (1991) pleads in *Agenda for research in special education* for more precise studies on target groups for special education. He refers not only to previous studies, but also to actual observations within the field of special education, which illustrate considerable uncertainty concerning definitions and procedures. There are many different denominations on several kinds of disabilities and often some special educational organizational or expert-connotation added to it. The same term appears to mean different things in different settings such as schools, national contexts etc. The problem of definition is so complex that the answer to the question "Which students shall be considered as qualified for special education measures?" will differ depending on definition and setting.

Fulcher (1989) argues that special education (and the concept of disability) is part of education policy and therefore problematic. Local school policies arise from the interpretation of the interaction between government policy, strategies and institutional conditions. Special education as well as integration, normalization and inclusion are highly dependent on national and local cultures, social structures and traditions. Thus the field is characterized by a confusion of ideas (see e.g. Booth, 1991; Fish, 1991; Söder, 1991).
Skrtic (1991) argues that special education is simply a residual from the 20th century contradiction between public education's democratic ends and bureacratic means and therefore not a rational response to student disability. He claims that

> "...special education is a nonrational system, an organizational artifact that functions as a legitimizing device. Culturally it distorts the anomaly of school failure and thus preserves the prevailing paradigm of school organization, which ultimately reinforces the presuppositions of organizational rationality and human pathology in the profession and institution of education and in society." (p. 182).

By regarding special education from this position, its functions in the educational system appears to be more contradictory and anomalous than if regarded as a rational, just and functional device serving as help for disatvantaged pupils.

SPECIAL EDUCATION – A RESPONSE TO EDUCATIONAL SHORTCOMINGS

In Sweden there is a common agreement on the compulsory school to be "A school for all". The consequences of this according to concepts like learning difficulties, impairments, students with special needs etc. have been under debate more or less since the beginning of the comprehensive school reform in the 1950s. However, the term "differentiation" has almost always exclusively dealt with tracking students according to ability in order guarantee optimal talent development among the most gifted. Since the early 70s, however, the kind of differentiation resulting from defining target groups for special education has continuously been under debate.

The proportion of students referred to special education in the mainstream schools greatly increased during the 1960s, and has stabilized at a high level. Recent statistics maintain that approximately one third of all students in a year cohort for shorter or longer periods and with more or less intensive measures receive some form of special education. Yet at the same time many students with very similar preconditions never received any such support (Sonnander, et al, 1993; Emanuelsson, 1995). The conclusion is that local school definitions of target groups for special education need to be considered and investigated in more detail.

Sonnander, et al (1993) report results from a longitudinal study of a low ability group (MMR according to IQ-measure criterion, IQ <70) from grade 6 and onwards. The group was selected from a representative sample of pupils from the cohort born in 1967. Interestingly, the low ability group was defined and identified only within the research project and not in the schools. The pupils belonged to regular classes and were not administratively classified as MMR-pupils. As they nevertheless (according to ability test results) were mildly mentally retarded students, one might expect all of them to belong to the one-third of the cohort selected for special needs education. But this was not the case. According to the authors, 25 per cent of these pupils had never received any special education. This justifies questioning the selection procedures and policies for special educational support within the school system.

A topic much less discussed, however, is what needs special education should respond to. Should it be a response to the needs of the student or the needs of the system (i.e. regular teaching) or both? There appears to be a tendency for school classes to have a certain number of students with "special needs". Thus the preconditions for referring students to special education differs substantially between schools and classes (Emanuelsson, 1995; Skrtic, 1991; Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995).

Sweden has experienced since 1991 considerable cut-backs in school resources. Even if this has not meant any change in government policies according to resource allocation within schools, it is still an important factor related to the definition of the target population. The 1991 School Act maintains that priority for resources must be given to those with the most explicit needs. Yet, when the total amount of resources decreased, the number of special education teachers was also reduced (Persson, 1994). Another consequence was that the average number of students per class/teacher increased, resulting in a larger work-load for the teachers. As a result of this, one can also expect a greater need for teachers "to get rid of" problematic students, which, in

turn, may lead to an expansion of the the special education target groups. In such a situation, the question of definition concerning what and whose needs that are to be met by special education, becomes even more problematic and important. Thus even if the governmental allocation guidelines remain the same, the local resource allocation discussions become more difficult and complex as the total amount of resources decreases. These discussions also lead to prioritizations about which pupils should get what. It is therefore important to scrutinize how these matters come into practice in local schools.

THE "SPEKO" PROJECT

The research project partly reported here (Special Education and its Consequences, SPEKO) started in 1993 with funding from The National Agency for Schools. The main aim is to investigate processes of defining target populations for special education in Swedish schools. Doing so I have concentrated on knowledge and awareness aspects in different professions of school personell responsible for both identification, defining and referring decisions leading to special education measures taken toward certain students.
The following areas are elucidated:

- Motives for special education measures to be taken and organized
- Priorities of needs
- Definition of target population, guidelines for deciding upon individual needs

One method for gathering information was taped interviews in combination with information taken from relevant school documents, when available.

In the selection of schools we searched for a wide variation with respect to preconditions for school work e.g. big towns, suburbs, smaller cities and rural areas. All selected interviewees were well established and had been employed at an average of about ten years in their school. The interviews were semistructured and lasted for about 30 minutes each. The interviewers were equipped with a list of important question areas which they were obliged to ask about:

1. How is the concept special education defined in terms of practice in the local school?
2. What are the motives for special education measures taken?
3. What conditions are decisive for the amount of special education in the school?
4. In what ways and to what extent is special education regulated in local school policy documents?
5. To what extent is special education measures towards certain students planned and documented as a result of work in personell teams?

27 special educators, 35 classroom teachers and 18 principals were interviewed about how they conceived and described the special educational activities taking place in their schools. The taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed with respect to differences and similarities in relation to the main question areas above.

The second source of information is the so called UGU database which consists of data about pupils gathered by using questionnaires and administrative data obtained from principals and administrative staff in schools. For my project two cohorts will be used; roughly 5 000 pupils born in 1977 and 10 000 pupils born in 1982. These two cohorts are interesting because these pupils have been taught under the same national curriculum (Lgr 80) all their schooldays.

By using sophisticated statistical methods it will be possible to find out possible differences or similarities between three groups of pupils; a. those who have been taught in special groups (approximately 2,5 %), b. those who have got special educational support occasionally within their classroom or in certain resource rooms (approximately 30 %) and c. those who never had any special educational support (approximately 67 %).

MULTI-PARADIGMATIC RESEARCH AND THE COMBINATION OF METHODS

Previous research within the special educational field has mainly been carried out within the frameworks of three distinct paradigms; the psychological (or more correct, the psycho-medical), the organizational and the sociological paradigm. Early research in special education had a burden from medicine in the sense that difficulties were defined more or less exclusively as originating from within the child him/herself. Treatment was consequently ordinated by medical doctors or psychologists. The aim was to fit the child to the demands of school. At least in Sweden this paradigm still is in the highest degree vigorous with professional upholders such as Gillberg, von Euler and Lundberg (see e.g. Lennerstrand, von Euler, Olofsson & Gillberg, 1990).

Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of this paradigm led to alternative theoretical frameworks represented especially by British researchers such as Barton, Tomlinson, Vlachou and Armstrong (see e.g. Barton & Tomlinson, 1984, Vlachou & Barton, 1994, Armstrong, 1995).

The sociological paradigm still holds the fort but is under attack from advocates for the organizational paradigm (see e.g. Skrtic, 1991, Reynolds, 1995). This paradigm describes special needs as a consequence of deficiencies in school organization, effectiveness and curriculum implementation. School restructuring is the solution to the problem and this will minimize the problem of pupils who fail to fulfil the demands of the school. The occurence of this shift of paradigm in the 90's looks like more than just a coincidence. A surge of budget cuts in most Western societies today paves the way for measures aiming at the restructuring of schools which, according to the paradigm, means increasing effectiveness without the need for extra resources. This increase of effectiveness offers a solution to the problem of educational under-achievement and consequently the need for special education.

By designing the work using complementary methods it is possible to use data which gives possibilities to demonstrate the relational nature of special education. The quantitative part (UGU-data) will elucidate e.g. personal characteristics that has

a high connection with the probability of getting special educational support. But it will also elucidate social attributes of the "special needs group". The qualitative part (interviews) on the other hand, throws light on organizational and societal aspects of the need for special education in schools; its purposes, criteria for pupil recruitment, dimensioning and so forth.

Fig. 1. Factors exerting influence on the need for special educational support for pupils as a consequence of deficiencies on the micro-, meso- and macrolevels.

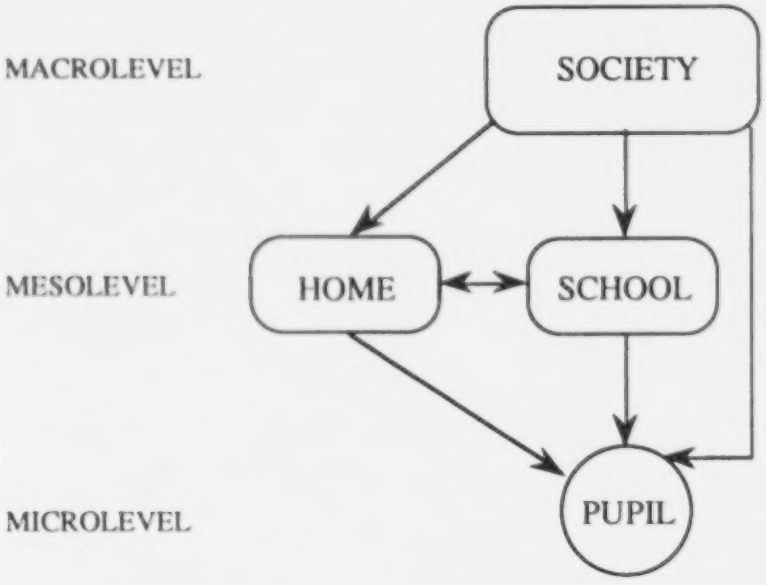

Figure 1 aims at illustrating how phenomena on the macro-level (e.g. the national testing and grading system) may influence the pupil's possibilities to catch up with the demands of the school and how home and school environments at worst may contribute to strenghten individual difficulties resulting in school failure and call for special education.

SOME RESULTS

When defining the concept of special education, most interviewees in my study do so with reference to regular education in the classroom. They describe special education as an activity aiming at training basic cognitive and social skills with relatively few pupils at a slow pace. This is the predominant answer and rather few refer the special educational activity to anything else but to the deviant pupil. Four out of five interviewees conceive the activity as a means for helping pupils who experience difficulties at school. However, every fourth (24 %) also mention shortcomings in school organization, working methods in the classroom or other circumstances in the environment encircling the pupil as possible causes for the difficulties shown.

A general feature according to the definition matter is that the interviewees view special education as an almost necessary complement to the common instruction in the classroom. It also appears that class teachers and special teachers seem to have arrived at a tacit agreement of a kind that Kivirauma & Kivinen (1988) describe as follows:

> Special education lightens the work load of teachers in ordinary classes by offering more or less permanent solutions (such as transfer to special education classes or therapy in a clinic) to the problem of difficult students (p. 160)

However these kinds of agreements tend to contribute to the maintenance of Status Quo in schools. By referring the problems of difficult children to specialists, classroom teachers might use special education as an excuse for a pedagogy which in itself is selective and not appealing to children with e.g. learning difficulties.

Some of the interviewees define the concept of special education as a different kind of competence emanating from supplementry education at the university. This competence, however, is then described in terms of sophisticated methods to come to grips with students difficulties. One respondent comments were:

> To me special education means that there is a person who has better knowledge of students' difficulties, what it's due to and knows some more tricks of the trade. (Primary school teacher) [My translation].

Thomas (1995) warns of the false security that comes from handing over difficult students to specialists because this might be devastating for the self-confidence and professional skills of the regular teacher:

> ...teachers have begun to lose confidence in their own ability to assess and cater for the children in their charge. They have really begun to believe that they are not skilled enough to deal with children who are finding their work at school difficult.

The motives for special education measures mentioned by the interviewees are typically bound to characteristics of individual impairments or pathologies. The interviewees mainly claim that general learning disabilities and socio-emotional disturbances are the most common reasons for special education. Physical or perceptual handicaps are also mentioned. Learning disabilities are often connected to some kind of subject taught in the classroom and two thirds of the interviewees mention reading/writing difficulties as the most common problem. Also mathematic difficulties are mentioned by some but not so frequently as is reading/writing difficulties.

The results from the interviews support the claim that difficulties in coping with demands of the school is the most important reason for additive support. My results also indicate that among individual child characteristics, socio-emotional disorders are most common (65%). This finding is in agreement with the National Agency for

Education (National Agency of Education, 1994, p. 9) reporting that socio-emotional problems have increased in most school districts in Sweden. The problems increase in the upper grades which brings about teachers working with 13-16 year olds to experience the most severe problems.

Half of the interviewees mention general learning difficulties as a reason for giving special educational support. These learning difficulties are referred to as an unability to "keep up with the rest" of the pupils in the classroom race. However very few question the circumstances for this and regard the "keeping up-problem" as an individual deficit.

Some interviewees claim that it might be unprofitable to use extra teaching time for children whose learning odds appear to be very short. For instance, one primary school teacher says:

> Is it really meaningful to give special education to hopeless pupils, pupils we feel it meaningless to waste time on. They don't learn anything anyway. I think it's time we ask provocative questions even at school. I think, even if it is horrible to say, that we'll have to cut down resources for them. We'll have to give them up a little..." [My translation].

Many interviewees mention controversial and provocative issues like this in relation to budget cuts in schools. They express the opinion that the aim must be to get value for money which in turn implies that it is wasted time to give children with e.g. learning disabilities additional support or help.

Closely related to the issue of motives is the question of the amount of special education in the schools. Swedish educational authorities have expressed worries concerning the quantity of special education in relation to regular education. Decisions on extension of and amount of resources allocated to special education is often made from tradition and seldom related to virtual needs. A strong group of special education professionals seem to maintain their own labour-market which Fulcher (1989) describes as follows:

> Thus professionalism constructs its clients; in medicine as patients, not people with a body, and in education as alleged disabilities rather than as pupils. (p. 264).

The division of professionals in schools might contribute to segregative measures concerning difficult and/or deviant students. They tend to be viewed as a deviating kind of problem individuals with certain needs who need training by specialists. In addition this implies special education activities to be arranged as deconstructed and simplified skill-training far from the regular classroom activities. It is thus irrelevant whether the student is taken out of the classroom or gets the help in it. It is the stigmatizing activity in it self which implicitly sorts certain kinds of disabilities out of the range of "normality". This is expressed by many interviewees:

> Yes, they do the same things as in the classroom but leave a lot of things out and I make it simpler in a way. Yes, the basic skills and they don't need to do all pages and all that the others do. We skip that. (Special education teacher) [My translation]

The results show that most special education takes place outside the regular classrooms in part-time so called clinics within the mainstream system. Students with needs are mostly defined from an agreement between the regular and special education teacher, and in accordance with the specialities of the special education teacher available. The special education pupils often recieve the same, though a simplified version of the subject as their peers. Teaching is executed at a slower pace and with immense patience from the special education teacher, though more or less isolated from the ongoing work taking place in the regular classroom. Still there is no clearly outspoken hope for the target students to catch up to the "average" level of knowledge and skills. Perhaps the main outcome of the pull-out system is labelling, or segregating classification, that may serve other more negative purposes than educational and appearing to be very hard to get rid of.

The interviewees were also asked about how IEPs were used as the statutory regulations state that such plans are to be drawn up for those pupils who are targeted for special education service (National Board of Education, 1987). However, more than half of the answers suggested that such plans were never used. The headteachers regretted that this was their bad conscience and few claimed that there was anything to gain from IEPs in practice. Moreover, many special education teachers considered flexibility to be the hallmark of their professionalism and claimed that IEPs might hamper the quality of their work. Some said that these plans were just 'paper tigers' and thus served no useful purpose:

> It was a torment to sit down and draw up things that nobody ever looked at. I myself never looked at it and nobody else did either. (Primary school teacher) [My translation].

Even if this attitude is a violation against the proposition in the 1987 regulations very few seemed to find any reason for changing their resistance against IEPs.

Our results also indicate that special education to a small degree becomes a subject of evaluation. Almost half of the interviewees (42 %) claim that no evaluation at all is done and another 10 % are uncertain. However, many special education teachers refer to continous evaluation by which they seem to mean recurrent follow-up of their work.

> We didn't carry out a real evaluation with pencil and paper and all that. In most cases we ask ourselves 'Do you think this has worked out well?'. We talk aboot this continously, you might say that it's a continous evaluation. [My translation].

Many teachers express difficulties in connection with evaluation. Evaluation is conceived as something inflicted on them by authorities and therefore not developing their own practice. On the contrary evaluation might work subversive as you get aware of your shortcomings.

> We find a lot of flaws in our work and know that there will be no change next year. So some of us feel that this is wasted time. That afternoon could be better used. (Lower secondary teacher) [My translation].

CONCLUSIONS

Special education in its traditional form tends to widen the gap to regular education. This is so because if special education is thought upon as remedial services, to gain access to special education services the pupil must demonstrate a pattern of repeated failure. Pianta (1990) points out that such systems "increase the distance between the child's level of competence at entry to the system (failure), and the level of competence acceptable for exit from the system (average performance)". He also advocates prevention-oriented services targeting groups of individuals that have not yet been identified as having problems (p. 309).

One also has to face the fact that placement in itself does not guarantee a superior service. The setting (resource-rooms, clinics, regular class-room etc.) may provide teachers with the opportunities to support the pupil with optimally suited instruction. This is an area that requires further research.

Earlier research has focused mainly on the effects of special education in terms of knowledge and skills performed by the special education pupils. However, these effect studies have to be supported by research concentrating on the complex role that special education plays in today's schools. This means that the connection (or lack of connection) between special and regular education needs to be scrutinized. Only then can the functions, roles and effects of special education be fully understood. Our results show that this is seldom done in the school settings. Thus special educational competence is frequently utilized in a traditional way i.e. the deviant pupil gets treatment from a specialist. However, it is doubtful if such measures contribute to long-term solutions in "a school for all" perspective.

One obvious result of our study is that definitions of target groups for special needs education are decided more or less randomly, especially if they are related to patterns of resource allocation between and within schools. This becomes then to a substantial part true also for definitions of target populations. What is considered a reason for diagnosed difficulties in one school may be seen as just a part of normal variation in another school. This is also what has been reported in several earlier studies (e.g. Arnman & Jönsson, 1983, Sonnander et al, 1993, Rosenqvist, 1995).

One consequence of our findings is that special education should be characterized as a natural part of schools' educational practices and contribute with deeper knowledge, by which pupils' difficulties can be understood as consequences from something more than just individual characteristics and so called deviances. This conclusion is supported by Kavale (1990) who claims that "special education cannot be viewed as a system apart from regular education but rather as a part of a larger system which includes regular and special education students." (p. 54).

My findings also suggest that special education as described by the majority of interviewees in the study, should be characterized as a natural part and a consequence of schools' educational practices. Thus special education might challenge a restricted and stereotyped view of education, schooling and instruction and widen school environments to include all children not only rhetorically but also in practice.

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